Book review: The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty

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Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson*'s book "The Narrow Corridor: States, Societies, and the Fate of Liberty"* follows up on their expansion of the important factors influencing political systems in their book *Why Nations Fail*. Acemoglu, an economist, and Robinson, a political scientist, discuss liberty's emergence and nourishment in societies. They provide history and analysis brilliantly, arguing that liberty is executed to its full form when balance exists between state and society. All the chapters reflect the interaction between states and societies, and analyze the conditions under which liberty is cultivated or exterminated.

The central concept of the book is that liberty does not arise on its own. Also, it is not only the result of democratic or liberal institutions (the end of the history). Rather, liberty arises from a fragile balance between "state" and "society". They refer to John Locke's liberty, "everyone is free in their lives," that is essential for human development and economic growth, which requires innovation, and innovation requires liberty (P. 112). In the chapter, "The Red Queen," they argue that this balance, "narrow corridor," is threatening due to conflicts between "society" that seeks independence and liberty, and "the state" that seeks power. Thus, there is a threat that liberty may be compromised if the state becomes too powerful (despotic society, China). Similarly, if a society is too weak to challenge the state, there may be a complete disorder and loss of freedom (authoritarianism). (p. 71) Hence, both lead to an unsustainable situation, as *the narrow corridor* is fragile. (as shown in the figure).

The metaphorical space where state power and societal freedom reinforce each other is referred to as the 'corridor.' (p. 71) No single one, whether it is a powerful state or a fragmented society, can ensure freedom. The authors argue that liberty is not possible without both a state with power and a society that can counter despotism. Through several examples, the authors highlight different countries around the world and how they navigated through the *narrow corridor* and the consequences that arise once that balance is disrupted (Western Africa). They state that "it is clear that liberty has been rare in history and is rare today, because they are trying to protect themselves and their families from violence and fear" (xii).

The authors examine how the Holy Prophet and the European nations, among others, highlight the importance of this balance (p. 82). These encourage civil society, where citizens can easily take part in states' actions such as politics. The provision of freedom through these means makes it much easier to promote liberty. Additionally, they clarify the continuous effort required for political liberty and invoke the "*Red Queen effect*." (p. 48) This effect suggests that the state and society are mutually adapting for their existence. As a society's power increases, its ability to challenge and curtail the state's authority also increases. (p. 50) Such processes of change facilitate the maintenance of liberty.

In chapter 14, "*Into the Corridor,*" they contend that at any point in history, states with unchecked power had proportionally greater autonomy over their citizens compared to state-controlled bureaucracies. Instead, when societies have lacked mechanisms to counter the state's authority, they have

experienced dictatorship even in the presence of being casually democratic. (p. 412) The book highlights the primacy of norms, rules, beliefs, and power relations that formulate the society's capacity for self-mobilization. Ironically, those norms will continue to undermine one's freedom even when a society is politically advanced. An example is India's caste system (p. 238), constraining the freedom of certain groups in the society despite constitutional guarantees of equality.

The book presents standards and concepts to define freedom. The authors contend that social norms, especially those that stem from historical oppression, can restrict the freedom that one can enjoy. They take the example of the 19th century, when women's rights were advanced, especially in Britain and the U.S. in the 1960s (p.421), when women were not allowed to engage in public life, as a matter of socio-cultural norm. This examination of sociocultural norms contend that liberty faces several challenges in situations where social norms are rigid.

Acemoglu and Robinson examine the effects of modern difficulties on liberty, specifically the influence of technology and globalization. They further elaborate on how innovations like AI and surveillance technology, specifically the social credit system used by Hitler and China, pose benefits and risks at the same time. The social credit system allows for better governing but raise questions regarding civil privacy and liberties. The authors mentioned authoritarianism, especially the Chinese style, which offers economic advancement and growth but heavily undermines freedom. (p. 493) Acemoglu and Robinson claim that these styles of governance, while appealing for their promised expansion, deeply restrict personal freedom. Such systems, having no regard for liberty, stand against developing democracies around the world.

A recurring theme in *The Narrow Corridor* is that of institutions and their relation to the level of liberty. They argue against the idea that culture is an absolute determinant of a country's success and believe in an inclusive country's economic institutions that foster liberty and enable growth and political stability. They examine the concept that democratically crafted institutions, such as those that guarantee accountability, political engagement, and equality, create the required environment for liberty to flourish (p. 400). Even so, the understanding is that there is no simple correlation between liberty and institutions. The authors consider that even democratically elected governments can abuse their power if protective measures and the balance of power within a state are insufficient. Consequently, the authors point out the issue of institutional resilience, which, as a system, can respond to new challenges and ensure that power does not rise without control.

Liberty is rare in history, even today. Promoting liberty faces difficulties such as changing social norms that are deeply set within communities' sentiments. The authors believe that promoting liberty requires an attempt to work within existing cultural and social boundaries since reforms that are too radical tend to upset political arrangements. Solon's reforms in Athens are prime examples that prove that culturally sensitive, gradual changes seem to work better in the long run than sweeping reforms implemented from the top. (p. 44-46) This shift of reconstructive effort of social change suggests that placing liberty against the balance of order is far from a simplistic exercise.

In the 10th chapter, they discuss the threat of the American exceptionalist approach. In such a way, "*The book"* reveals as much the diversity and complexity that exist between the state's power, its society's power, and liberty

(p. 306). The analysis that authors bring forth distinguishes the processes through which liberty is struggled for and how it becomes enshrined (less match), only to be lost again in the collapse of political and social order. The authors present a case that liberty is not a state of being but rather a continuous process that requires constant attention. Along with sophisticated political understanding, these historical events ensure this book's timelessness, making it compulsory for people concerned with the future of liberty and democracy.

Although the book offers useful perspectives, it also begs pertinent questions about the definition of liberty in different societies, the impact, the place of military might and how the differences lead the countries towards or away from the narrow corridor. Still, The Narrow Corridor presents a hopeful but practical vision of the future of freedom, stressing that with vigorous engagement from both society and government, the balance of power will be kept and freedom will flourish independently.

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